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Meltdown

Three years ago as Congress was moving toward creation of the Department of Homeland Security, Sen. James Jeffords was worried that the Federal Emergency Management Agency would get swallowed within the giant new bureaucracy.

"As it now stands, FEMA is a small, flexible agency with a director reporting directly to the president," he said. "This chain of command works well, but it would be lost if FEMA were moved into the Department of Homeland Security. Adding another layer of bureaucracy to the disaster declaration process can only slow vital response and recovery efforts."

Jeffords was one of a few senators to vote against creation of the new department. One of the reasons was the absorption of FEMA into the department.

"Jeopardizing FEMA's abilities to deal with disasters is not the best way to secure our homeland," Jeffords said. "As we move forward, we should be thoughtful and deliberate, and we should focus on fixing the failures and not tinkering with the successes."

Fast forward three years. We have learned that Michael Brown, director of FEMA, waited until after Katrina had hit the Gulf Coast to request 1,000 Homeland Security workers for the region. Some small rescue and communications teams were already in place, but Brown did not seek significant assistance until five hours after landfall. Even then, Brown acknowledged it would take two days for the workers to reach their destination.

Thus, Jeffords' warnings proved to be prophetic. A responsive disaster relief agency would have been on a war footing as hurricane season approached. Instead, Brown was sending memos to Michael Chertoff, secretary of homeland security, seeking approval for action, even as Katrina was tearing New Orleans apart.

Brown's response to the hurricane has drawn furious criticism. He is the one who said that residents who stayed behind in New Orleans had themselves to blame for their problems. Did anyone tell him that 57,000 households in New Orleans had no car?

The city of New Orleans did not have an evacuation plan for those without cars, nor did the state of Louisiana. In an ideal world, the city would have been ready. But if FEMA planned to abdicate its responsibility as the nation's primary disaster relief agency, it should not have done so before local plans were in place, particularly for one of the nation's most vulnerable cities.

Cries for Brown's resignation have begun, though one commentator noted that if President Bush were to follow his previous pattern, he would award Brown the Medal of Honor. That was the prize he gave to the architects of disaster in Iraq.

Brown is a disgrace, and he ought to be fired, but for the time being he is trying to censor reporting of FEMA's operations. Reuters has reported that FEMA has barred the press from photographing dead bodies as they are recovered from the flood in New Orleans.

Brown's memo to Chertoff expressed the hope that FEMA's response to Katrina would help the agency's "image." But that image has morphed into something else, and FEMA does not want the press to see. As bodies by the hundreds are fished from the waters of New Orleans, the nation will be presented with evidence of FEMA's failures and of the organizational meltdown of the Bush administration. Those are pictures the nation must see.